Introduction

This is not a piece of national history, though it owes a great deal to the work of more nationally minded historians. It is an attempt to examine, within short compass, the interaction of the various major cultures of the British Isles from the Roman period onwards. The emphasis throughout is upon the British Isles, in the belief that it is only by adopting a 'Britannic' approach that historians can make sense of the particular segment in which they may be primarily interested, whether it be 'England', 'Ireland', 'Scotland', 'Wales', Cornwall or the Isle of Man.

To concentrate upon a single 'national' history, which is based upon the political arrangements of the present, is to run the risk of being imprisoned within a cage of partial assumptions which lead to the perpetuation of nationalist myths and ideologies. Herbert Butterfield, in his essay, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931), stressed the importance of trying to see all sides of past conflicts. The modern world in his view arose from both Protestant and Catholic, not from one or the other. In the same way, no single 'national' interpretation, whether English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh, can be treated as self-contained. A 'Britannic' framework is an essential starting point for a fuller understanding of these so-called 'national' pasts.

This point might hardly seem worth stressing, were it not for the fact that, in its continued use of a 'nation' paradigm, the historiography of the British Isles still bears traces of its late nineteenth-century origins. The professionalisation of history brought with it the acceptance not only of Leopold von Ranke's critical methods but also his stress upon the role of 'nations' in history. Ranke believed that the 'nation' was the divinely created unit at work in universal history, with each nation having its own appointed moment of destiny. So far as England is concerned, the publication of William Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England* (from 1866 onwards) marked the introduction of history on the Rankean model. Stubbs' *History* was acceptably 'modern' in its critical use of primary sources. There was also no doubt that Stubbs saw the 'nation' as the appropriate unit for a historian to concentrate upon.

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Nation-based history became the basis around which the new academic subject of history expanded. The *English Historical Review* was founded in 1886 and in due course national history reviews were founded first for Scotland (1904) and then for Ireland (1938) and Wales (1970). In the new elementary and secondary schools of the late nineteenth century, history was taught on national lines as a means of inculcating the virtue of patriotism. Libraries took 'nations' as the appropriate cataloguing division for the 'subject of History'. During the twentieth century, long after the original impulse from Ranke had been lost sight of, the writing of history along 'national' lines seemed axiomatic.

The extent to which the writing of history was so strongly nation-based was disguised by the way in which English historians shifted between the use of 'British' and 'English' as if the two were somehow equivalent. Three examples of this tendency may suffice, all taken from major historians.

The historical development of England is based upon the fact that her frontiers against Europe are drawn by Nature and cannot be the subject of dispute . . . In short, a great deal of what is peculiar in English history is due to the obvious fact that Great Britain is an island. (L. B. Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930), pp. 6–7)

In the Second World War, the British people came of age . . . The British people had set out to destroy Hitler . . . No English soldier who rode with the tanks into liberated Belgium . . . The British were the only people who went through both world wars from beginning to end . . . The British empire declined . . . Few even sang 'England Arise'. England had risen all the same. (A. J. P. Taylor, *England 1914–45* (Oxford, 1966), p. 600)

Nevertheless, something can be learned about the British political system . . . The early attainment of national identity is one of England's most distinctive features . . . To this extent British political development may be plausibly regarded . . . If we are to understand the reasons for the peculiarities of the English political system . . . Quite apart from all the consequences that have flowed from Britain's imperial role. (Keith Thomas, 'The United Kingdom', in Raymond Grew, ed., *Crises of Political Development in Europe and the United States* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 44–5)

These examples indicate that a single nation-based approach is insufficient. Much as the historians concerned wish to keep within an 'English' framework, they are led in spite of themselves to refer to a wider dimension.

There was, however, an earlier tradition of historiography whose practitioners had been willing to consider the histories of Ireland, Scotland and Wales as an essential part of the story. Thomas Babington Macaulay may have entitled his master work *History of England* (1848–61) but it was, in effect, a history of the British Isles during what he saw as the

crucial period of modern history, the Glorious Revolution of 1688. James Anthony Froude is best known for history of England in the sixteenth century but his study of *The English in Ireland* (1872) together with his novel *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy* (1889) reveal a remarkable understanding of Ireland. W. E. H. Lecky's *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1878–90) included Ireland and Scotland as well as England within its overall perspective. Elie Halévy's *History of the English People* (1913), despite the limitations of its title, took a wide view of its topic, with extensive treatment being given to Ireland and Scotland. Halévy apart, the influence of these writers tended to decline in the early twentieth century because their narrative approach, their use of the concept of 'race' and their handling of sources were thought to be unprofessional. With them, a 'British Isles' approach declined also. Thus, the modern French historian François Bedarida, modelling himself on Halévy some years later (1979), confined his attention largely to English history. For much of the twentieth century, indeed, within the British Isles, history has been taught and written along national lines, and hence tied to nationalist ideologies and nation-building. In England this approach was represented by such figures as Arthur Bryant. Within the schools, the teaching of English Literature took on a nationalist colouring under the influence of the Newbolt Report of 1921. In Ireland, exponents of the ideology of 'Irish Ireland' put in place the framework of a nationalist history curriculum soon after De Valera came to power in 1932. In the United States, also, ethnocentric attitudes among immigrants from the British Isles have encouraged the production of 'national' histories geared to specific English or Irish ethnic tastes. The American appeal to 'Manifest Destiny' was of course a prime example of nationalist history.

The concept of 'nation' provided modern historians with a convenient framework around which to organise their materials but a price has had to be paid. What later became national boundaries were extended backwards into a past where they had little or no relevance, with the consequence that earlier tribal or prenational societies were lost to sight. The border between 'Wales' and 'England' is a case in point. It is now assumed that Herefordshire and Shropshire are part of 'England' and that their inhabitants are 'English', with all the appropriate 'mental furniture' to go with that term. In fact these border counties have been the scene of intermingling between 'Welsh' and 'English' cultures over a long period of time. The same point may also be made about the border between 'England' and 'Scotland', which was drawn at one time to include the (now Scottish) Lothians within England and at another to include Celtic Cumbria within the kingdom of Strathclyde. The presence of 'Arthur's Seat' in the heart of Edinburgh is a reminder that the Lothians, Wales

and Cornwall were once linked by a common Celtic culture stretching from Traprain Law to Tintagel. The modern distinction between Ulster and south-west Scotland did not exist in the later middle ages, since the channel dividing the two areas served as a unifying element for the seaborne post-Viking society which occupied the 'Isles'. Thus to make sense of so much variation over time requires a 'Britannic' framework, although this need not exclude awareness of the influence of Europe and of a wider world.

This point may be reinforced if it is borne in mind that episodes which are generally recognised as having been of decisive importance in the history of the various 'nations' of the British Isles in fact transcended the national boundaries of a later date. The Roman Conquest, the Barbarian invasions, the Viking raids, the Norman Conquest, the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution were all 'events' which affected the British Isles as a whole and brought about crucial changes in the relations between the various Britannic societies of the period concerned. The so-called English Civil Wars were in fact multi-national events which had long-term consequences for all three kingdoms. To deal with any one of these episodes requires in every case something wider than a national framework. The only possible exception is perhaps that of the Roman Conquest, from which Ireland was spared, but even here recent research has revealed the importance of Roman contacts with Ireland. Indeed it has been suggested by Professor Barry Cunliffe that Irish mercenaries served in the Roman army before returning home. There is in any case the influence upon Ireland of the Latin culture of the later Roman empire introduced through the medium of Christianity. Pictish Scotland is also now receiving more attention.

The present author is not alone in pressing for a 'Britannic' approach. Several recent examples of a similar impatience with the straitjacket of exclusively national categories come readily to mind. Michael Hechter, in his stimulating book *Internal Colonialism* (1975), used the concepts of 'core' and 'periphery' in an attempt to elucidate the relations between England and what he termed, misleadingly, the 'Celtic Fringe'. Hechter's main point was that England established a colonial relationship with other parts of the British Isles, from which it alone benefited. John Le Patourel's study *The Norman Empire* (1976) was a successful attempt to avoid a narrowing concentration upon Norman England by examining the impact of the Norman Conquest within the British Isles as a whole. Hugh Trevor-Roper's fine essay 'The Unity of the Kingdom' (though open to criticism for its use of 'race' as a historical concept) stood out from other contributions within a collection entitled *The English World* (1982) by its willingness to move beyond a merely English perspective. John Pocock,

in his powerful article 'The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of an Unknown Subject' (*American Historical Review*, April 1982), attempted to define a field of study that might properly be called 'British History'. Pocock emphasised the political aspects of 'British Isles' history in an essay which, though brief, ranged widely in time and space. Since that pioneering effort Pocock has remained at the forefront of efforts to promote a wider archipelagic approach in the history of poltical thought during the early modern period. Oxford and Cambridge, for example, once pre-eminent centres of English-based history, now encourage the study of the history of 'The British Isles'.

My own efforts to deal with the problems raised by 'national' histories have led me to see what I have called the 'Britannic melting pot' in terms of a complex of interacting cultures, an approach which carries with it the danger of emphasising the importance of ethnicity at the expense of 'class'. 'Culture' is not the only concept available to historians but it has the advantage of enabling the historian to raise questions about life-style, customs, religion and attitudes to the past in a more fluid way than if confined to a one-dimensional framework. Cultures change over time, are influenced by other cultures, cross national boundaries and often contain sub-cultures within themselves. 'Nation', in contrast, is a term of rhetoric used to evoke feelings of unity in response to a particular situation. When Churchill spoke of 'Britain's finest hour' or De Valera referred to 'the struggle of a small nation for its independence over seven centuries' they were attempting to sway the emotions of their audiences, not to expound a detached piece of history. It is very doubtful whether the term 'nation' can escape these emotional overtones. One sees this most clearly perhaps in the case of post-colonial Africa where the use of 'nation' all too often conceals the true realities of tribal cultures. From this point of view, it is an accident of history that several states (nations?) eventually made their appearance in the context of British Isles history. The realities with which the historian should deal are the cultures which lie behind the label nation-state. The concept of 'nation' stresses the differences between a particular society and its neighbours. A Britannic approach, in contrast, would emphasise how much these cultures have experienced in common.

With this in mind there is still a good deal to be said for approaching the history of the British Isles during the immediate post-Roman centuries along traditional lines, as a conflict for supremacy between 'Celts' and 'Anglo-Saxons'. It should be made clear, however, that these terms do not refer to distinct 'races' but to broad linguistic and cultural differences. The Celtic and Germanic languages are both Indo-European. Both sets of peoples came from central Europe. In their tribal organisation they

closely resembled one another. There is nothing to be gained by using the outmoded nineteenth-century concept of 'race'. We would do better to see the British Isles from the fifth century onwards as an arena in which several Celtic cultures and several Germanic cultures competed with each other. In Ireland there were differences between north and south, in Scotland between Picts, 'Irish', 'British' and Anglo-Saxons. Among the Anglo-Saxons in 'England' similar contrasts long existed between Northumbria and Mercia and Wessex, as well as within each kingdom. What is clear about the immediate post-Roman centuries is that some 'Britannic' framework is necessary to do justice to a situation in which the Briton (and Celtic-speaking) St Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland (most probably the northern areas of it) during the fifth century and Irish monks in turn became missionaries to the inhabitants of 'Scotland' and north Britain. The life of St Cuthbert is a case in point. He was originally a monk at Melrose (a Celtic monastery in today's Scotland), but then moved to Lindisfarne, an island off the coast of what is now Northumberland. After the Viking invasions his body finally ended up in the Norman cathedral at Durham, where his memory is revered as an Anglo-Saxon saint. Historians of art devised the term 'Hiberno-Saxon' (now in turn replaced by 'insular') to create a broader framework than traditional national categories. It is time for historians at large to follow their example and to break away from the concept of 'nation', which they inherited from nineteenth-century historiography, and which is too rigid to use when dealing with the complexities of the post-Roman centuries.

The same judgement may be made with equal force about the three 'Scandinavian centuries', from the ninth to the eleventh, when large areas of the British Isles fell under the control of first, raiders and then settlers from Denmark and Norway. Modern historians play down the importance of this period but it is clear that the cultures of the British Isles underwent profound changes during these years. After this common experience, 'England', 'Ireland', 'Scotland' and 'Wales' all emerged as very different societies in the second half of the eleventh century from what they had been earlier. Marc Bloch saw this as the first phase of feudalism, but, whatever term is used, the old structures of the 'Celtic' and 'Anglo-Saxon' worlds undoubtedly underwent radical changes. Were it not for the clumsiness of phraseology, terms such as 'Anglo-Scandinavia', 'Hiberno-Scandinavia' and 'Scoto-Scandinavia' might be appropriate.

A new period began with the coming of the Normans (in the mid-eleventh century so far as 'England' and 'Wales' were concerned; in the twelfth century, in the case of 'Scotland' and 'Ireland'). The British Isles were drawn away from Scandinavia and into closer contact with northern

France as a consequence, though it was not until the mid-fourteenth century (perhaps later) that the links of northern 'Scotland' with Norway were finally severed. Continental-style feudalism now took root marked by self-conscious knightly institutions, and a greater emphasis upon links with the Crown. In the Church, the authority of the hierarchy became more pronounced. Although 'Normanised Scotland' established its independence within this Britannic framework during the fourteenth century, a Britannic approach is still necessary if attitudes and assumptions then are to be understood. The term 'Norman Empire' becomes increasingly unsatisfactory after the loss of Normandy in 1209, although the dominance of French culture continued until the late fourteenth century. The rise of St George as the patron saint of England indicates that a change of national identity was under way, although why this particular figure was chosen to replace 'The Holy Edward' remains unclear (a similar problem surrounds the choice of St Andrew for Scotland). Westminster Abbey still remains as a monument to 'The Holy Edward' though challenged from the late fourteenth century by St George's Chapel, Windsor.

During the early sixteenth century, further profound changes took place within the British Isles deriving largely from continental influences. Reformation and Counter-Reformation were the common experience of all the societies of the Britannic melting pot. Though European in origin, these movements became closely connected with the expansion of the influence of the English Crown, throughout the British Isles. The creation of a Protestant English empire was one of the main features of Britannic history during this period, leading to the extension of the influence of a biblically orientated culture throughout the British Isles, and the coast of North America. In due course, Scotland was also to be associated with the enterprise when, after the Union of the Crowns in 1603, Scottish and English settlers took part in the plantation of Ulster. Ireland became a society increasingly divided among Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians. The effects of this proved to be of lasting significance not merely within the British Isles but also in British possessions overseas. In Canada and Australia the conflict of the 'Orange' and the 'Green', like so much else, requires a Britannic framework for its elucidation.

With the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a further series of major shifts took place within the British Isles. A new industrialised and urbanised culture took root in northern England. Large-scale movements of population took place in response to the opportunities offered by an expanding industrial society. In addition to migrants from local areas, English emigrants were drawn into south Wales and Ulster, Scottish Highlanders and Irish into Glasgow and its environs, Irish and Welsh into the Liverpool area. The major

cities of the British Isles became multi-ethnic societies in which varied ethnic groupings competed for economic security, social status and political influence. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the diversity of this multi-ethnic society was still further increased by an influx of Jewish refugees from eastern Europe into London, Leeds, Manchester and Glasgow. Immigrants also arrived from other areas including Spain and Lithuania. The name of Wolfson College, Oxford commemorates the success of one of these newcomers. It was not an isolated case.

It was during these years of industrialisation at home that a new British empire was created overseas in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Though they formed part of the 'history of the English-speaking peoples' (to use Churchill's phrase), these emigrants were by no means all English. The new empire was 'Britannic', drawing for its population upon Scottish, Irish and Welsh as well as English. In due course, after the Second World War, the former colonies became even more multi-ethnic as a result of the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from Europe.

A paradoxical and quite unexpected turn to the imperial story was to occur after 1945 with the arrival in Britain of large numbers of immigrants from the West Indies, India, Pakistan and parts of Africa, at a time when the former Indian empire and the former colonial empire were ceasing to exist. The full significance of this wave of immigration has yet to be fully assessed. In the 1980s cultural tensions involving various immigrant groups led to serious outbreaks of rioting. It may be, however, that the creation of a multi-ethnic society in some parts of Britain is merely one of the ways in which the various societies within the British Isles are coming to resemble the United States. The partial Americanisation of popular culture within the British Isles had begun in the 1930s with the influence of American films. Since then other aspects of American culture have also taken root on both sides of the Irish Sea. Future historians may come to see this as a more important development than entry into the European Economic Community (1973).

It remains to mention the political changes which have taken place in the twentieth century in the wake of two world wars. In the years immediately after the end of the First World War, the United Kingdom felt the impact of a successful nationalist revolution in Ireland. The result of the conflict was the creation of an independent state in southern Ireland, leaving the remaining six counties of the north-east as a semi-autonomous 'province' within the United Kingdom. There was now a political border within the British Isles for the first time since the sixteenth century.

One of the consequences of the creation of an Irish Free State and later (1949) of the Republic of Ireland was the partial elimination of Ireland from historical interpretations of British history. It was almost

as if British historians had come to believe that it was possible to write a history of their own 'nations' without mentioning the Irish Republic or the historical territory which it occupied. In the case of the *Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* this tendency had the unfortunate effect of a map being printed in which Northern Ireland appears in some detail while the rest of Ireland remains a blank even though the period under discussion is well before the partition of 1920 (however, there is now a multi-authored, multi-volume *Short Oxford History of the British Isles*).

The same criticism may be made of Irish histories in which Ireland appears in isolation and not as an island linked historically with Britain for well over a thousand years. In fact, of course, close economic and cultural ties continued to exist between the United Kingdom and the Irish Free State. Informal cultural ties did not disappear. Universities in the Republic drew, as before, upon the United Kingdom for external examiners. Dublin civil servants in the Department of Finance long remained in touch with their London counterparts. The career of the great Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904–1967) is worth mentioning in this connection. Kavanagh learned about poetry from English models such as 'Gray's Elegy' and he remained very much the anglophile. The novelist John McGahern was able to take refuge in England after a clash with church authorities. Links were not as close as they had once been but they were nonetheless real. During the 1950s and 1980s Irish immigration into England took place on a scale unequalled since the 1880s. During the 1960s, as 'Eire' emerged from its self-imposed isolation under De Valera, contacts increased still further. During the 1970s, both states joined the European Economic Community. They were also drawn into close communication as a result of the continued crisis over Northern Ireland. In spite of themselves, the two governments were forced to recognise the existence of a 'Britannic' dimension.

The viewpoint adopted in this book is that the histories of what are normally regarded as four distinct 'nations' appear more intelligible if they are seen first within a general British Isles context and secondly if they are seen in terms of 'cultures' and 'sub-cultures'. Upon closer examination what seem to be 'national' units dissolve into a number of distinctive cultures with their own perceptions of the past, of social status ('class' is here seen as subordinate to culture), of religion and of many other aspects of life. As with any historical approach, however, the problem is complicated by the inevitability of historical change. Cultures change and interact over time. Where nationally minded historians tend to stress continuity over time between, say, the 'Scots' or the 'Irish' of different periods, a cultural approach involves the recognition that the perceptions of one period are radically different from those of another.

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In 1989, I argued that at least eight cultures co-existed in the British
Isles. Thus in Wales, the gulf between the Welsh-speaking, Calvin-
ist Methodist north-west and the more cosmopolitan, English-speaking
south indicated the drawbacks of speaking in terms of a single Welsh
nationality. I regarded the Welsh-Jewish poet Danny Abse as a product
of Cardiff rather than of 'Wales' as such. The Welsh nationalist Saun-
ders Lewis could be viewed as reacting against the environment of his
Merseyside birthplace to become the spokesman of the Welsh heartland.
In Scotland, the situation appeared as more complex. Here the south-
west, centred on the Clydeside conurbation, may be seen as a culture in
its own right, linked in conflicting sentiments with the Protestants and
Catholics of 'Ulster'. In contrast the western Highlands and the Hebrides
constituted a sub-culture, as did Orkney and Shetland. However, the
exploitation of North Sea oil since the 1970s has clearly been a source
of profound cultural change in both of these areas as well as on the east
coast. What had seemed like a clear contrast between east and west had
begun to dissolve into new cultural patterns. Ireland, partitioned in 1921,
remained divided at the end of the century, but the contrast between a
largely agrarian south and an industrial north had by 2000 changed rad-
ically. The Republic of Ireland was now an independent member of the
European Union, enjoying a period of unprecedented prosperity, whereas
Northern Ireland, divided by sectarianism and civil unrest, had lost its
former industrial base. Finally, in England, the decline of the industrial
north and the growing prosperity of the south, linked to the EEC markets,
accentuated the cultural differences between these two areas. Overall, the
influence of London and the south-east increased, thanks to such factors
as television, motorways, the growth of the London market and the influ-
ence of the EEC. Towns such as Brighton, Bath and Cambridge, fifty or
more miles from London, have become part of a southern commuter-belt
in which people live while working in London.

In 1989, there was a good deal to be said for regarding the United King-
dom as consisting of a dominant metropolitan culture (itself exposed to
transatlantic influences) and a number of provincial sub-cultures, with
the Republic of Ireland enjoying informal cultural and political links with
England, Scotland and, of course, Northern Ireland. By 2000, however,
this model no longer did justice to the complex cultural patterns of the
British Isles. Immigration during the post-war years had now brought a
new multi-ethnicity to the United Kingdom and especially to London.
South Asian and African cultures were now making their presence felt in
all manner of ways. There were now many more than eight cultures within
what was increasingly referred to in the media as a 'multicultural society',
a point exemplified in the emergence of Muslims as a political force to be